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SUBJECT: SOLID REPRESENTATION AT PRT KARBALA FIRST MEDIA CONFERENCE

HILLAH 00000026 001.2 OF 002

This is a PRT Reporting Cable

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: PRT Karbala hosted March 19 a media conference that was attended by 25 representatives from private and public television, radio, and newspaper outlets. The objectives of the conference included introducing Team Leader and PRToffs to the local media; expressing PRT support for the media's role in the democratic process; providing the PRT with an overview of Karbala's media; and discussing potential interaction between the PRT and the group. The conference concluded with an open discussion of ways the PRT and the media could best interact and provide mutual support, and an agenda of "next-steps". END SUMMARY

¶2. (SBU) On March 19, PRT Karbala hosted its first media conference. It included journalists, photographers, editors, and media technicians from both private and public organizations. 25 media representatives, including three women, traveled an hour to arrive at the Regional Embassy Office Hillah for the conference. Team Leader opened the conference with welcome remarks followed by an introduction of PRToffs. Participants were asked in an open discussion format to provide information about the nature of the Karbala local media, touching on issues of media safety and pay, training programs, censorship, access to officials, and media effectiveness. During lunch break, each participant completed a survey requesting contact and background information, ensuring the objective of enlarging the PRT's media contacts database.

KARBALA MEDIA OVERVIEW

¶3. (U) Out of the 25 media representatives present, 10 were employed as free-lancers and seven as government employees. They indicated that total Karbala media is approximately 300 individuals which include reporters, technicians, editors, and engineers and other technical staff. Of the 300 staff, 50 are reporters with 30 working for newspapers, 10 for television networks, and 10 for radio stations.

LACK OF SAFETY AND YET LOW INCOME

¶4. (SBU) Attendees lamented that they suffered from safety concerns as well as poor pay. All 25 participants claimed to have been previously threatened for performing their line of work. They noted that although they were issued weapon permits for their protection, they were unable to actually obtain weapons. PRT TL made a particular point of addressing the conference. He pledged that notwithstanding limited resources, the PRT would do what it could to enable the media to do its job. Furthermore, he encouraged the media to report to the PRT any threats to the media so that the PRT and the Embassy could try to address them.

15. (SBU) Conference attendees reported that they work multiple jobs to ease the financial hardship. Employees of private outlets often work for multiple outlets; one reporter said that he has three separate jobs. Since government reporters cannot hold non-governmental media positions, they hold part-time jobs as taxi drivers and the like. The average reporter working for a private organization earns only USD200 per month while governmental reporters earn slightly higher rates of around USD300 per month.

"WE URGENTLY NEED TRAINING"

16. (SBU) The need for specialized training, especially in technical skills, was a recurring theme at the conference. Most attendees have attended some short-term training offered by volunteer organizations. Training is currently available only at two non-profit organizations - Karbala Center for Media Improvement and the Technical Center for Media Training. The private Ahl Ul-Bayt University also offers some media courses, but conference participants gave its courses poor marks, agreeing that they are antiquated and lack a technical component. Overall, the discussions were critical of most of the programs for a lack of technical training, a lack of modern equipment to support technical training, and for being too short in duration. None of the courses teach software editing, for example, one of the greatest needs identified by conferees. They added that training in the United States would greatly benefit them.

MEDIA RESTRICTED; DE FACTO CENSORSHIP

17. (SBU) Participants animatedly responded to the subject of censorship and claimed "oppression" from security forces, political parties, and elected officials. Non-governmental representatives stated they were excluded from government meetings. Self-proclaimed government watchdogs indicated that they need to rely on third party sources for information as they

HILLAH 00000026 002.2 OF 002

have no access to council or committee meetings and are not granted interviews. They cited a newspaper that was shut down after it highlighted government corruption and waste in executing provincial capital projects. All media, government and private alike, stated that they are blocked by the government from covering any acts of violence in Karbala.

"WE ARE BIASED"

18. (SBU): When asked about media bias, attendees were frank and unapologetic in their admissions of their bias. They felt that they are effective despite and especially because of their biases. They reasoned that as long as each of the various factions (political, religious, etc.) has access to a media voice, the truth would likely be reported by at least one member of the media.

PRT AND MEDIA COOPERATION?

19. (SBU) During an open discussion to identify potential areas of cooperation between the media and the PRT, conferees asserted that assistance in establishing a media center is their highest priority. Although some favored a center for operations initially, this suggestion was voted down in favor of a training center. They mentioned converting some space at the "cultural house", a building operating under the auspices of the Ministry of Culture, to a media center. They indicated that media representatives have previously made this suggestion to the Governor and urged the PRT to reinforce this idea with the Governor. PRToff concluded the topic by suggesting using the PRT as the focal point to collect all written ideas the attendees may have in mind for a Karbala Media Center that will be discussed in a follow-up meeting the PRT will organize.

110. (SBU) In addition, attendees advocated setting up a provincial project database, to be posted on a public web page.

They expressed frustration that the provincial government capital budget process is almost totally opaque. "The secrecy of the provincial government process effectively precluded meaningful media coverage of budget and project planning." They asserted that publishing information publicly would provide accountability to the populace. No suggestions were made, however, as to how the provincial government would be convinced to cooperate.

¶11. (SBU) COMMENT: The conference reopened PRT Karbala's initiative to reach out to media representatives in the province. Both the PC Chairman and Sheikh Ali Kamona, former Karbala governor, were supportive of the event, and provided the PRT a solid list of introductory contacts. The PRT will undertake steps to help develop a plan for a functional and cost-effective media center, and to help find media training for the sector representatives. END COMMENT
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